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A HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE GOUIN SERIES-SYSTEM OF TEACHING MODERN LANGUAGES AND OF ITS USE IN THE UNITED STATES

CHARLES HART HANDSCHIN
Miami University, Oxford, Ohio

The Gouin series-system of teaching modern languages received its first prominent notice among English-speaking peoples in editorials in the *Review of Reviews* in 1892 and 1893, in which Mr. W. T. Stead gives an enthusiastic account of the method as tried on his children. In the same year M. Gouin's book, *L'art d'enseigner et d'étudier les langues*,¹ was published in English translation by H. Swan and V. Betis.² These gentlemen also founded the Central School of Foreign Tongues, in London, in 1892, and later four branch schools, in which they have trained great numbers of teachers of various nationalities to teach by the Gouin method. Today hundreds of schools in England are using this method, while the reform or compromise method, also largely used in England, has accepted some of the devices of the Gouin method.

But what is the Gouin method, someone will ask? Discontented with the inefficiency of the conventional methods of teaching languages, François Gouin invented the series-system, in which the conversations, or lessons, treat of a unified theme, such as: "I open the door," or "The maid pumps water." Each lesson is written out in a series of sentences, each of which tells of an action. Gouin considered that in this way language material can be more easily learned than otherwise, and he said he had learned this system by observing children in their talk.

Gouin set himself to working out a thorough linguistic system which should include the entire vocabulary of the language to be taught. Accordingly he arranged his lessons in general series, on

¹ Paris, 1880.

² *The Art of Teaching and Studying Languages*. By F. GOUIN. Translated by H. Swan and V. Betis. London: Longmans, Green & Co.

such topics as "man," "the quadrupeds." Thus under "man" came the various series on man, and under these the individual lessons on man's activities. Gouin worked this out very thoroughly, crossing out each word in his dictionary as he used it, and continuing until the dictionary was exhausted. For imparting the vocabulary of a twelve-year-old child twelve hundred lessons, of from eighteen to thirty sentences each, were found sufficient, and these he taught in three hundred recitation hours. For imparting the vocabulary of an adult educated person Gouin used from three thousand to four thousand lessons, which he taught in from eight hundred to nine hundred recitation hours. To this vocabulary of the "objective" language Gouin added from one thousand to two thousand lessons on figurative language, while the language for abstract processes was intermingled with the ordinary lessons from day to day.

Thus the method was thorough enough on the side of the vocabulary; and as Gouin himself taught the grammar, this part of the instruction was likewise well cared for, although his highly original scheme for the treatment of the tenses is somewhat fanciful. Gouin's personal teaching was, according to good testimony, a most remarkable achievement.

France, the home of the series-system, for many years did little to encourage M. Gouin. Enthusiastic and efficient teacher but poor scholar that he was, Gouin failed to present his method so as to interest scientific men. It was only after the phenomenal success of his method in England that the government of the city of Paris organized a school for M. Gouin. In this public school Gouin, who had refused a call to London, taught until his death in 1896. Here his ideas are being perpetuated by the training of scores of teachers each year, who in turn go out to teach others. The direct method, also used extensively in French schools, shows decided traces of the series-system.

The method has found its way also into a number of Scandinavian schools, notably in Christiania, as well as into the schools of Holland, where it is used in Rotterdam, Amsterdam, The Hague, Utrecht, Deventer, Arnheim, Bois le Duc, and Almelo.

In Germany articles on the Gouin method began to appear in

1895. The method is used in its purity at Gandersheim-im-Harz, and in one public and seven private schools in Hamburg. A number of gymnasia are using the main principle of the system, namely, the arrangement of the material in a natural series, as for instance the *Bockenheimer Realschule* and the *Musterschule* in Frankfurt-am-Main.¹

In the United States the progress of the series-system has been slow. The first mention of it in this country was so derogatory that, seemingly, it discouraged teachers from looking into the matter.² Mr. Findlay's scant comprehension of the series-system in his article is due evidently to lack of knowledge of the theory of the method, and to the fact that he never had an opportunity to observe the Gouin teaching in actual operation; and so, member of the *vieille garde* that he is, he throws the system bodily out of court.

However, the publication of Gouin's book in English translation, mentioned above, and also an adaptation of the Gouin method by Betis and Swan,³ as well as articles in *Die neueren Sprachen*,⁴ served to acquaint a limited number of our teachers with the theory of the method. M. Betis's own attempt to demonstrate the practical side of the method in Boston, in the years 1895 to 1897, seems to have had no great results.

The report of the Committee of Twelve on College Entrance Requirements of the Modern Language Association and the National Education Association⁵ devotes some space to the Gouin, or psychological, method, as Betis and Swan have named their adaptation. The report says:

¹ Professor Max Walter, the director of the school, whom many of our teachers heard on his tour through the United States last spring, says in his book, *Englisch nach dem Frankfurter Lehrplan*: "Ein grosser Vorteil des (Gouin'schen) Verfahrens besteht darin, dass der Schüler sich den Verlauf einer Reihe selbst genau vergegenwärtigen, die aufeinanderfolgenden Handlungen feststellen, und in sprachliches Gewand kleiden muss."

² Findlay, "Reform in Modern Language Instruction," *Educational Review*, 1893, pp. 334 ff.

³ *The Facts of Life*. London and New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1896.

⁴ Vol. III, Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 9, and a keen criticism of the method, Vol. VI, No. 6.

⁵ *Report of the United States Commissioner of Education*, 1897-98, pp. 1391-1433; also *Addresses and Proceedings of the National Educational Association*, 1899, pp. 707-55.

Out of the conviction that modern-language study should be made attractive, and out of the desire to adapt instruction to the known workings of the human mind, has come a system that seems more deserving of serious attention than the grammar method or the natural style of teaching.

However, since the report finally recommended adherence to the grammar-translation method, this compliment to the Gouin method bore no visible fruit. In the same year we find a glowing panegyric on the virtues of the series-system,¹ which, however, produced no results, since it pointed to no definite literature, such as printed lessons, which teachers might have used. In 1900 Kron's essays on the Gouin method² were published in book form.³ This is the best statement of the method extant, and much superior to Gouin's own enthusiastic but unscholarly exposition. Brebner, in *The Method of Teaching Modern Languages in Germany*,⁴ devotes several pages to the Gouin method in Germany, which add but little to our knowledge. Occasionally we find essayists purloining an idea or two from Gouin; for example, Ingres, when he asks: "Could not the teaching of languages be linked to such subjects as arithmetic, geography, physics, etc.?"⁵ In 1906 a notice was published of a course in an adaptation of the Gouin method given at Miami University,⁶ and this was followed by an exposition of the method pursued in this course.⁷ In 1908 Fritsche gave a notice of the Gouin method,⁸ without accomplishing anything for the method, because, for some reason, he gave no information on the point most important to teachers: namely, where to get material to teach with. Bagster-Collins devotes several pages to the series-system in his book, *The Teaching of German in Secondary Schools*.⁹

So much for the history of the method. Now as to its use in the United States. The first, and for years the only, printed

¹ Charvet, "How to Learn a Language," *Educational Review*, Vol. XV, pp. 74-79.

² Cf. *Die neueren Sprachen*, Vol. III.

³ Kron, *Die Methode Gouin oder das Serien-System in Theorie und Praxis*. Marburg, 1900.

⁴ London, 1904.

⁵ "The Teaching of Modern Languages," *School Review*, Vol. XII, pp. 491 ff.

⁶ *Miami Bulletin*, April, 1906.

⁷ *Ibid.*, February, 1907.

⁸ "The Study of the Systematic Vocabulary," *School Review*, Vol. XVI, pp. 102-9.

⁹ New York, 1908.

Gouin lessons in America were those contained in Betis and Swan's book.¹ But this adaptation of the series-system suffers from two main defects: first, it violates the principle that "the picture must not be changed" in the objective part of the lesson; and, second, Gouin's principle that the student shall not see the printed page before he has learned the lesson cannot be adhered to, even if one should cut up the book and hand out the pages piecemeal. It is, however, an excellent book for teachers and for such as are seeking to enrich their vocabulary by reading. The book has had no large sale, and as a textbook is scarcely used.

The most recent use of the Gouin method, an adaptation of the series-system to our American conditions, has been worked out by two professors in Miami University, and has been in use in that school for six or eight years. It is now being used in some two hundred high schools and academies and a few colleges.

Gouin's idea that language can best be taught in series is psychologically and pedagogically correct. This basal principle has been adopted even in the teaching of the mother-tongue. For this reason, material arranged in a natural series is easier to remember than in any other arrangement. This may best be made evident by a paragraph of a Gouin lesson. Thus:

The child washes his hands and face.

The child goes to the washstand;

he takes up the water-pitcher;

he pours water into the basin; and he places the jug on the washstand;

he takes up the soap;

he dips the soap into the water;

he rubs his hands with the soap; and he washes his hands thoroughly.

When the class can reproduce this, orally and in writing, without verbally memorizing it, they have thoroughly got so much vocabulary. This method does away with the use of the mother-tongue in the classroom, and it gives *Sprachgefühl*.² In the Miami adaptation

¹ *The Facts of Life*.

² As to the method of teaching the lessons: The teacher speaks a sentence slowly, laying emphasis on the verb. The class repeats the same. (Gouin himself, however, did not allow concert speaking.) When a paragraph is finished it is repeated by several members of the class in turn and then by the entire class. Thus through the entire lesson. The next day the lesson is reproduced orally, each student giving one sentence, and the greater part of the hour is devoted to teaching the new lesson. At home the student rewrites the lesson in another tense, person, number, etc.

of the Gouin method, one hundred lessons (of from eighteen to twenty-five sentences each) in German, and one hundred and seventy-five in French, are taught. This number is considered sufficient to give *Sprachgefühl*. Here the plan differs from Gouin's in that his plan was to teach the entire vocabulary of the foreign language by means of the series before allowing the student to go on to literary study. In the Miami plan the reading of an easy text is begun about the second week. In the teaching of grammar Gouin is forsaken, and the grammar is taught inductively, many devices of the reform method being used, such as reproducing the lesson in various persons, numbers, and tenses, etc. After the principal forms have been taught inductively, a regular grammar is taken up little by little. In reading-texts, likewise, the reform textbooks are given the preference.¹ The advanced work is conducted as in other schools, except that the foreign language is used almost exclusively in the classroom.

The results of this teaching have thus far been very satisfactory. The interest of the students is much more lively than under the grammar-translation method, and their knowledge of, and ability to read, the foreign language is considerably greater. While the method is no harder on the student (it is, indeed, rather easier) than the old method, it does tax the teacher, especially until he works into the method. However, the exhilaration of a direct method is considered compensation enough for the extra effort. Wherever the plan has been given a trial by a properly trained teacher it has succeeded in satisfying the school authorities of its excellence. In the few cases where it failed to do so, the failure was due, no doubt, to the unpreparedness of the teacher and to the fact that he made his work too prominently a conversation course.²

¹ Such as Savory, *Drei Wochen in Deutschland*; and Hein, *Auswahl deutscher Prosa der Gegenwart*. New York: Oxford University Press.

² A full bibliography of the literature of the series-system may be found in Kron, cited above. The series lessons published by M. Gouin are: *Langage objectif*; *Les séries domestiques et champêtres*, etc., fascicule I et II. Paris: École pratique des langues vivantes (250 rue Saint Jacques), 1895. Also, at the same place, one book of subjunctive phrases; and in the *séries littéraires: Contes populaires allemands: Grimm*. Paris: Chez l'auteur. *The Miami Bulletin* (Oxford, Ohio), November, 1908, gives a bibliography and an exposition of the teaching by the series-system. Cf. also Evans, "Modern Language Teaching in the Frankfurt Musterschule," *Monatshefte für deutsche Sprache und Pädagogik* (Milwaukee), March, 1910.